

## The Bristol Press: Larson, Dodd Back Mark Twain Coins

U.S. Rep. John Larson and U.S. Sen. Chris Dodd - joined by colleagues in Missouri, California and New York - are asking Congress to authorize a commemorative coin in honor of Twain, with proceeds going to benefit four institutions dedicated to preserving Twain's legacy....

Larson, Dodd Back Mark Twain Coins

By: Jackie Majerus

The Bristol Press

March 5th 2009

Mark Twain, the man who once wrote, "The lack of money is the root of all evil," may be immortalized on some of it.

U.S. Rep. John Larson and U.S. Sen. Chris Dodd - joined by colleagues in Missouri, California and New York - are asking Congress to authorize a commemorative coin in honor of Twain, with proceeds going to benefit four institutions dedicated to preserving Twain's legacy.

"He's worthy of it," said Jeffrey Nichols, executive director of the Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford, which initiated the coin project and stands to profit most from the venture. "Whether he would like it or not is another story."

But Nichols said he believes Twain wouldn't have minded much.

"He knew how to raise money," Nichols said. "He knew the importance of a dollar."

If passed into law, a \$5 gold coin and a \$1 silver coin would be sold as collector's items in 2013.

Larson, an East Hartford Democrat whose 1st District includes Bristol, said honoring Twain with a commemorative coin that also raises money for the organizations dedicated to his work is fitting.

"He's the quintessential American," said Larson.

The profits from the sale would go to the Mark Twain House & Museum in Hartford, the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum in Hannibal, Mo., the Center for Mark Twain Studies at Elmira College in New York and the Mark Twain Project at the Bancroft Library at the University of California in Berkeley.

"It could be several million dollars for the organizations to share," said Nichols.

It's the first time the four Twain-centered organizations have worked together in this way, Nichols said, and he hopes it's the beginning of a great friendship between the groups.

"We're complements," said Nichols. "We're not competitors. We all have the exact same mission."

The gingerbread Gothic home in Hartford was built in 1874 by the author and humorist who, coincidentally, often struggled with debt and had to sell the home in 1903. It was rescued from demolition in 1927 and draws more than 68,000 visitors yearly.

Twain House officials say repaying debt incurred from building its \$19.5 million, five-year-old visitors center also has strained its finances. More than 30 museum employees have been laid off in the last four years.

The state of Connecticut allocated \$50,000 to the Twain House last summer, tapping a contingency account set aside to help groups that serve the public interest.

Cindy Lovell is executive director of the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum in Hannibal, Mo.

"This is where the stories started," Lovell said. "This is where it all happened. This is where Tom Sawyer took place."

Lovell said her museum gets about the same number of visitors as the Hartford house. In the past two months, people from 20 different nations have passed through.

While Lovell said the Missouri museum, which began in 1912, just two years after Twain died, isn't "in the same fix as Hartford" financially, she said, "We really do need money."

Twain's wife came from Elmira in upstate New York, and Twain spent a lot of time there, said Nichols. He said visitors can see an octagonal study that Twain's sister-in-law had made for him.

"It's a fabulous little thing," Nichols said.

A collection of Twain's papers and diaries are at the university library in Berkeley, Nichols said.

Nichols said he is grateful for the support from Larson, Dodd and the other lawmakers.

"This institution is worth preserving," Nichols said.

The Hartford attraction will get 40 percent of the proceeds, and the others will share the remainder equally, at 20 percent each.

"The money will go to support all of us in the end," said Nichols.

Nichols said attendance and membership at the Hartford museum - except for school groups - is up, and with the help of a recent \$500,000 grant from the Annenberg Foundation, operations have become more normal.

"We're being very conservative in how we spend," said Nichols.

The idea for the coins started about five or six years ago, Nichols said, and had been in the works for awhile when it picked up steam last spring.

Though Twain had little use for politicians, he would likely have understood the need to raise money to preserve his historic homes and papers. And he probably would have appreciated the fact that the cost will be borne only by those who buy the coins.

"It won't cost the taxpayers anything," said Lovell.

The price of the coins will cover the face value and the cost of designing and issuing them, including labor, materials, manufacturing, marketing and shipping.

"The government covers its costs first," said Nichols.

Then a surcharge of \$35 on the gold and \$10 on the silver is added, to be passed on to the four Twain sites.

"We think this is terrific," said Larson, who called Twain "a true American icon."

Larson said he doesn't expect any trouble getting the law passed. He said lawmakers in Missouri, New York and California are also backing the bill.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.